THE AERONAUT.

No. 20. September 1. 1816.

Sometimes let gorgeous tragedy
In sceptered pall come sweeping by.
Milton – Il Penseroso.

The proper design of tragedy ought ever to be, to uphold virtuous feeling, & to depict the degradation of vice. It ought to elevate the mind, and by raising emotions of sorrow and of pity, excite those sensations which are ever the most pleasurable to the human heart. The Tragic muse should love to sing of successful virtue, of triumphant heroism, and of defeated iniquity. The excellencies of

the heart should be held up to our admiration, and the darkness of human depravity rendered disgusting. As the language is lofty, dignified, & elevated so the sentiments should breathe the pure spirit of virtue and of truth. The cause of religion should be supported, and the career of crime checked in its desolating course.

Such are the ends of Tragedy. But are they always put into practice Does every tragedy we read possess these powerful requisites for moving human feeling in a proper way? — How often do we behold tragedy made the instrument of depicting vice in the most alluring colors, & of casting contempt on virtue; or if the latter is not expressly attempted, yet the pleasing dress given to criminal emotion, totally obliterates the feelings of virtue. We do not always see the virtuous hero triumph; disgrace & death is his portion, while ~~the~~ his more successful rival, triumphs amid

crime, his heart foul with abominations, and his hands imbrued with blood.

These remarks were suggested by the perusal of a tragedy, which has attained much celebrity in the literary world, and has excited considerable attention & curiosity. We allude to Bertram, or the Castle of St Aldobrand; which to the disgrace of his profession, was written & given to the Stage by a clergyman; by one, whose business it ought to have been to have preached the gospel which he has profaned, and to promulgate those truths which he seems to have disregarded in his writings. He has written several romances previous to the present production; and has taken those dark & dreadful views of human character, ~~which~~ with which an embassador of heaven ought not to have been acquainted, and upon

which his mind ought never to have dwelt. That they all display uncommon powers of genius, none can deny; but how degrading is it to the genius of a clergyman that it is not employed in the production of something that might be of lasting benefit to the human race, which might raise their grovelling & sinful propensities to the contemplation of something more divine, and point out the path of salvation instead of suffering them to grope on in moral darkness, blinded by sin, and deluded by the snares of hell. Had his powers of description been employed in painting the pleasures of heaven, and the miseries of hell; had his muse soared with Milton, or with Cowper on the wings of religious extacy, and prayed that HE might inspire

"Who touch'd Isaiah's hallow'd lips with fire,"

his conscience would have approved his exertions, and mankind would have risen from his works, not, as now, wasted & exhausted with the impressions of sinful passion, but purified and exalted, roused to a more refined emotion.

Let us first consider the plot & moral of the play in question, and see what is their tendency. We behold a nobleman, degraded from his rank, & becoming an outlaw of the darkest kind; abandoning all human feeling, except love, & cherishing sentiments of the most deadly hatred and the most implacable revenge. We see this monster of human crime, seducing the wife of his enemy, and murdering her husband; rejecting all the ties of feeling, & ending his career in suicide. Yet, dark as his character is, we see nobleness & loftiness of soul attributed to him; as if there could survive in a soul dead to

all the charities of life, scorning every kindly sensation, and steeling itself to every thing which can distinguish ~~the~~ man from the foul nature of the fiend.

The heroine, attached to this Bertram when he was in the full enjoyment of his power, cherishes her love for him, though in the mean time married to another, who was as noble in his nature as Bertram was dark in his. She yields to the designs of her returning lover, and beholds him in the sequel murder her husband at her feet. She loses her reason, murders her child, & finally expires in the arms of her husband's destroyer.

Such is a brief outline of the plot. The scope of the whole play is certainly very unfavorable to the encouragement of virtuous principle. If the bad do not actually triumph, it is because all the principal actors are swept off the stage, & share one common fate. But

the writer appears desirous to make us familiar with human crime, and rather offers it to our admiration, than to our abhorrence. For instance, when the Prior says —

> High hearted man! sublime even in thy guilt,
> Whose passions are thy crimes, whose angel-sin
> Is pride that rivals the star-bright apostles.
> Wild admiration thrills me to behold
> An evil strength, so above earthly pitch —
> Descending angels only could reclaim thee;
>
> Act 3. sc. 2.

there is without doubt an attempt made to exalt Bertram in our favor, and to glose over his crimes with the nobleness of his soul.

But the characters of the play are overstrained and unnatural. No man ever like Bertram retained the lustre of noble pride, with the utter extinction of all virtuous sentiment. Bertram is a very fiend, with some of the features of a purer nature. Imogine so far forgets her duty toward heaven,

her husband, and herself, as to fall from

"her high sphere of purity & peace,"

from being "the honored wife of Aldobrand," to be "the scorned minion of a ruffian." And in her dying speech, when she recovers her reason, and recognises Bertram supporting her, instead of recoiling from him as the destroyer of her peace, & the assassin of her husband, she says

"Have I deserved this of thee?"—

St Aldobrand alone appears noble, dignified, & engaging of the three principal characters. But he does not make his appearance till the 3d act, & is killed at the end of the 4th. His sentiments & expressions are in a totally different strain to those of the others.

My days have past away mid war & toil.
The grinding casque hath worn my locks of yore
——— Mine heart's sole wish
Is to sit down in peace among its inmates,
To see mine home for ever bright with smiles,
Mid thoughts of past, & blessed hopes of future

Glide thro' the vacant hours of waning life —
Then die the blessed death of aged honor,
Grasping thy hand of faith, & fixing on thee
Eyes that, tho' dim in death, are bright
with love.

Act 4. sc. 2.

With regard to the poetical merit of "Bertram", we cannot but speak highly. The richness & glow of expression, the warmth & luxuriance of imagery, strike the reader with innumerable beauties. Some parts are terribly sublime, and others are exquisitely touching. The chords of human feeling are stretched to their utmost. The terrors of despair, the moaning of anguish, and the wild bursts of madness are highly wrought up. ~~Two or three examples will suffice~~. The ~~remorse~~ occasional remorse and inflexible sternness of Bertram are forcibly described. A few examples must suffice.

Ber. ——— Imagine — yes!
Thus pale, cold, dying, thus thou art
most fit

To be enfolded to this desolate heart —
A blighted lily on its icy bed —
Nay, look not up, 'tis thus I would behold
thee.
That pale cheek looks like truth — I'll gaze
no more —
That fair, that pale, dear cheek, these
helpless arms,
If I look longer they will make me human.
Act 2. sc. 3.

Ber. —— Why dost thou shrink from me?
Despair hath its embrace as well as pa[illegible]
May I not hold thee in these folded arms?
May I not clasp thee to this blasted heart?
When the rich soil teemed with youth's
generous flowers —
I felt thee sunshine — now thy rayless light
Falls like the cold moon on a blasted
heath
mocking its desolation. Act 3. sc. 2.

Ber. My fiendlike glory hath departed from me.
Bertram hath nought above the meanest lo[illegible]
I should have beaded him in halls of pride —
I should have mated him in fields of death —
Not stol'n upon his secret bower of peace,
And breathed a serpent's venom on his flower
(Looking at a casement in the tower) She is there.
She weeps — no husband wipes her tears away.
She weeps — no babe doth cheer the guilty mo[illegible]
Aldobrand — no! I never will forgive thee,
For I am sunk beneath thee. Act 4. sc. 1

Bert. Thou fairest flower
Why didst thou fling thyself across my path?
My tiger spring must rush thee in its way,
But cannot pause to pity thee.
Act 4. S. 2.

Child. Dear mother, take me home —
Imo. Thou hast no home —
She, whom thou callest mother, left thee none
We're hunted from mankind — (sinking down)
Here will we lie in darkness down together,
And sleep a dreamless sleep — what form is that —
Why have they laid him there? (recoiling)
Plain in the gloomy depth he lies before me,
The cold blue wound whence blood hath ceased to flow,
The stormy clenching of the bared teeth —
The gory socket that the balls have burst from —
I see them all — (shrieking)
It moves — it moves — it rises — it comes on me —
'I will break th' eternal silence of the grave —
'I will wind me in its weaking manowless arms —
Hold up thy hands to it, it was thy father —
Ah, it would have thee too, off — save me — off —
Act 5. sc. 1.

The spirit, abstracted from the peculiar expressions which are all of course Popish, as proceeding from the lips of a monk, breathed in the following lines, is worthy of our attention: —

Prior. —Thou hast forsaken Heaven.
Speed to thy castle, shut thy chamber door,
Bind fast thy soul by every solemn vow
Never to hold communion with that object
If still thy wishes contradict thy prayer,
If still thy heart's responses yield no harmony—
Weary thy saint with agonies of prayer
On the cold marble quench thy burning breast;
Number with every bead a tear of soul;
Press to thy heart the cross, & bid it banish
The form that would usurp its image there. Act. 3. sc. 2.

Time does not permit us to dwell any longer upon the merits or defects of this tragedy. But we cannot help remarking, that the mind turns with disgust from the contemplation of such unparalleled crimes, in the persons of the drama, as well as from the idea of an author, who neglecting the immediate path of his duty, has reared a monument to his fame, which, while it marks the powers of his mind, will at

the same time record the bad & useless employment of them, and hand down his name to posterity, linked with opprobrium, & allied with disgrace.

We shall close the present number with a few observations upon modern tragedy, and upon the general mode employed in conducting it. Love is almost universally made the key-stone of the plot. The whole catastrophe turns upon the good or ill success of some amorous connection. So that a tragedy now-a-days is little more in most of its scenes but a variation of the same romantic expression of inviolable attachment, and all the other attendant circumstances of a love-story.

Again. The characters of most modern plays are too much above the general ideas & habits of men to be as interesting as they are intended. With the views & feelings

of men in the highest ranks of life, few can participate. Why not descend to more common life? Why go to countries for characters, where every feeling is different, & every thought out of our own way of thinking? There are few tragedies which convey a deeper interest than the Oronoko of Southern, the Fatal curiosity of Lillo, to which may be added George Barnewell, the Gamester, & a few others which might be named. Or if lofty characters must be employed, there are surely stories enough in English history, which cannot fail to interest, without having recourse to those, with whose history few are acquainted.

Let the writers of tragedy either strike out a new path, or avoid the defects of former plots. If they can do neither, let them turn their types to other subjects than tragedy. Let them not continue to fill the language with repetitions of the

same thing under different forms. But it is to be feared, tragedy can never be completely reformed. Habit seems to have induced a necessity in the writers of tragedy to proceed as usual; and perhaps it is compatible with the feelings of the human mind to mingle the stronger & the gentler passions. We would be apt to turn away with cold indifference from a play where there were no female characters; & where female characters are, the passion of love must be represented & described. The softer sympathies of our nature must be brought into play.

Yet, for the perusal of the closet, tragedy may be much improved & refined. It may be shortened, & rendered more agreable to the sober reflection of solitude & silence. It may be made the vehicle of moral instruction, & convey many a lesson to the mind. But we can never

of men in the highest ranks of life, few can participate. Why not descend to more common life? Why go to countries for characters, where every feeling is different, & every thought out of our own way of thinking? There are few tragedies which convey a deeper interest than the Oronoko of Southern, the Fatal curiosity of Lillo, to which may be added George Barnewell, the Gamester, & a few others which might be named. If lofty characters must be employed, there are surely stories enough in English history, which cannot fail to interest, without having recourse to those, with whose history few are acquainted.

Let the writers of tragedy either strike out a new path, or avoid the defects of former plots. If they can do neither, let them turn their types to other subjects than tragedy. Let them not continue to fill the language with repetitions of the

same thing under different forms. But it is to be feared, tragedy can never be completely reformed. Habit seems to have induced a necessity in the writers of tragedy to proceed as usual; and perhaps it is compatible with the feelings of the human mind to mingle the stronger & the gentler passions. We would be apt to turn away with cold indifference from a play where there were no female characters; & where female characters are, the passion of love must be represented & described. The softer sympathies of our nature must be brought into play.

Yet, for the perusal of the closet, tragedy may be much improved & refined. It may be shortened, & rendered more agreable to the sober reflection of solitude & silence. It may be made the vehicle of moral instruction, & convey many a lesson to the mind. But we can never

expect to see our hopes realised, till some ~~other~~ second Shakespeare, with magic in his touch, & ecstacy in his wing, arise ~~to~~ upon our sight; till the force of pre-eminent genius be enabled to beat down all opposition, & to rear a new standard of excellence.

F.